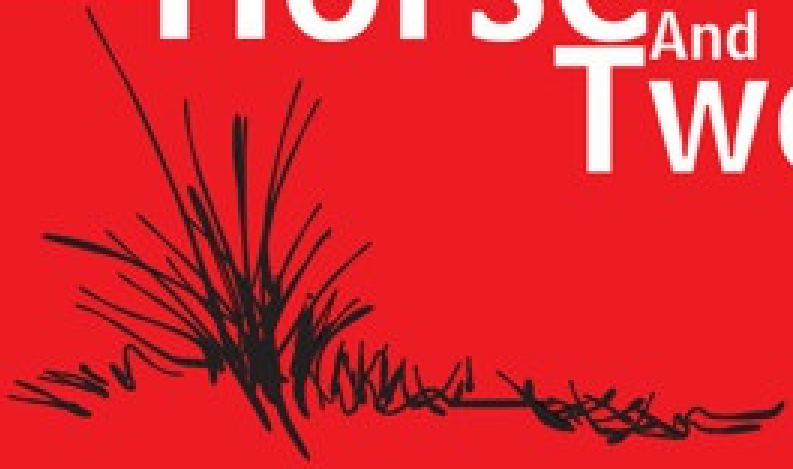
A Horse And Two Goats



Written by R K Narayan under his collection of "Malgudi Days"

©copyright R K Narayan

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

AHorseAnd

TwoGoats

Written by R K Narayan under his collection of “Malgudi Days”

©copyright R K Narayan

A HORSE AND TWO GOATS

Of the seven hundred villages dotting the map of India, in which the majority of India's five hundred million live, flourish and die, Kritam was probably the tiniest, indicated on the district survey map by a microscopic dot, the map being meant more for the revenue official out to collect tax than for the guidance of the motorist, who in any case could not hope to reach it since it sprawled far from the highway at the end of a rough track furrowed up by the iron-hooped wheels of bullock carts. But its size did not prevent its giving itself the grandiose name Kritam, which meant in Tamil “coronet” or crown on the brow of the subcontinent. The village consisted of fewer that thirty houses, only one of them built from brick and cement. Painted a brilliant yellow and blue all over with gorgeous carvings of gods and gargoyles on its balustrade, it was known as the Big House. The other houses, distributed in four streets, were generally of bamboo thatch, straw, mud and other unspecified material. Muni's was the last house in the fourth street, beyond which stretched the fields. In his prosperous days Muni had owned a flock of sheep and goats and sallied forth every morning driving the flock to the highway a couple of miles away. There he would sit on a pedestal of a clay statue of a horse while his cattle grazed around. He carried a crook at the end of a bamboo pole and snapped foliage from the avenue trees to feed his flock; he also gathered faggots and dry sticks, bundled them, and carried them gathered for duel at sunset.

His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of miller flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment for the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday. She was old, but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive.

His fortunes had declined gradually, unnoticed. From a flock of forty which he drove into a pen at night, his stock had now come down to two goats, which were not worth the rent of a half rupee a month the Big House charged for the use of the pen in their backyard. And so the two goats were tethered to the trunk of a drumstick tree which grew in front of his hut and from which occasionally Muni could shake down drumsticks. This morning he got six. He carried them in with a sense of triumph. Although no one

could say precisely who owned the tree, it was his because he lived in its shadow.

She said, "If you were content with the drumstick leaves alone, I could boil and salt some of you."

"Oh, I am tired of eating those leaves. I have a craving to chew the drumstick out of sauce, I tell you."

" You have only four teeth in your jaw, but your craving is for big things. All right, get the stuff for the sauce, and I will prepare it for you. After all, next year you may not be alive to ask for anything. But, first get me all the stuff, including the measure of rice or millet, and I will satisfy your unholy craving.

Our store is empty today. Dhall, chilli, curry leaves, mustard, coriander, gingelley oil, and one large potatoe. Go out and get all this." He repeated the list after her in order not to miss any item and walked off to the shop in the third street.

He sat on an upturned packing case below the platform of the shop. The shopman paid no attention to him. Muni kept clearing his throat, coughing and sneezing, until the shopman could not stand it any more and demanded, *" What ails you? You will fly off the seat into the gutter if you*

Download free from www.fabmart.com

sneeze so hard, young man." Muni laughed inordinately, in order to please the shopman, at the being called "young man." The shopman softened and said, *"You have enough of the imp inside to keep a second wife busy, but for the fact the old lady is still alive."* Muni laughed appropriately again at this joke. It completely won the shopman over; he liked his sense of humour to be appreciated.

Muni engaged his attention in local gossip for a few minutes, which always ended with a reference to the postman's wife, who had eloped to the city some months ago.

The shopman felt most pleased to hear the worst of the postman, who had cheated him. Being an itinert postman, he returned home to Kritam only once in ten days and every time managed to slip away again without passing the shop in the third street. By thus humoring the shopman, Muni could always ask for one or two items of food, promising repayment later. Some days the shopman was in a good mood and gave in, and sometimes he would loose his temper and suddenly bark at Muni for daring to ask for credit. This was such a day, and Muni could not progress beyond two items listed as essential components. The shopman was also displaying a remarkable memory for old facts and figures and took out an oblong ledger to support his observations. Muni felt impelled to rise and flee. But his self-respect kept him in his seat and made him listen to the worst things about himself.

The shopman concluded, *" If you could find five rupees and a quarter, you will have paid off an ancient debt and then could apply for admission to swarga. How much have you got now?""I will pay you everything on the first of the next month." "As always, and whom do you expect to rob by then?"*

Muni felt caught and mumbled, *" My daughter has sent word that she will be sending me money."*

"Have you a daughter?" sneered the shopman. *"And she is sending you money! For what purpose, may I know?" "Birthday, fiftieth birthday"* , said Muni quietly. *"Birthday! How old are you?"*

Muni repeated weakly, not being sure of it himself, *"Fifty."* He always calculated his age from the time of the great famine when he stood as high as the parapet around the village well, but who could calculate such things accurately nowadays with so many famines occurring? The shopman felt encouraged when other customers stood around to watch and comment. Muni thought helplessly, my poverty is exposed to everybody. But what can I do? *"More likely you are seventy,"* said the shopman. *"You also forget that you mentioned a birthday five weeks ago when you wanted castor oil for your holy bath."*

"Bath! Who can dream of a bath when you have to scratch the tank-bed for a bowl of water? We would all be parched and dead but for the Big House, where they let us take a pot of water from their well." After saying this Muni unobtrusively rose and moved off.

He told his wife, *" That scoundrel would not give me anything. So go out and sell the drumsticks for what they are worth."* He flung himself down in a corner to recoup from the fatigue of his visit to the shop. His wife said, *" You are getting no sauce today, nor anything else. I can't find anything to give you to eat. Fast till the evening, it'll do you good. Take the goats and be gone now,"* she cried and added, *"Don't come back before the sun is down."* He knew that if he obeyed her she would somehow conjure up some food for him in the evening. Only he must be careful not to argue and irritate her. Her temper was undependable in the morning but improved by evening time. She was sure to go out and work grind corn in the Big House, sweep or scrub somewhere, and earn enough *Page 2 of 10*

Download free from www.fabmart.com

to buy foodstuff and keep a dinner ready for him in the evening.

Unleashing the goats from the drumsticks tree, Muni started out, driving them ahead and uttering weird cries from time to time in order to urge them on. He passed through the village with his head bowed in thought. He did not want to look at anyone or be accosted. A couple of cronies lounging in the temple corridor hailed him, but he ignored their call. They had known him in the days of affluence when he lorded over a flock of fleecy sheep, not the miserable gawky goats that he had today. Of course he also used to have a few goats for those who fancied them, but real wealth lay in sheep; they bred fast and people came and bought the fleece in the shearing season; and then that famous butcher from the town came over on the weekly market days bringing him betel leaves, tobacco, and often enough some bhang, which they smoked in a hut in the coconut grove, undisturbed by wives and well-wishers. After a smoke one felt light and elated and inclined to forgive everyone including that brother-in-law of his who had once tried to set fire to his home. But all this seemed like the memories of a previous birth. Some pestilence afflicted his cattle (he could of course guess who had laid his animals under a curse), and even the friendly butcher would not touch one at half the price…And now here he was left with the two scraggy creatures. He wished someone would rid him of their company, too. The shopman had said that he was seventy. At seventy, one only waited to be summoned by God. When he was dead what would his wife do? They had lived in each other's company since they were children. He was told on their day of

wedding that he was ten years old and she was eight. During the wedding ceremony they had to recite their respective ages and names. He had thrashed her only a few times in their career, and later she had the upper hand.

Progeny, none. Perhaps a large progeny would have brought him the blessings of the gods. Fertility brought merit. People with fourteen sons were always so prosperous and at peace with the world themselves. He recollected the thrill he had felt when he mentioned a daughters, to that shopman; although it was not believed, what if he did not have a daughter? his cousin in the next village had many daughters, and any one of them was as good as his; he was fond of them all and would buy them sweets if he could afford it. Still, everyone in the village whispered behind their backs that Muni and his wife were a barren couple. He avoided looking at anyone; they all professed to be so high up, and everyone else in the village had more money than he. *" I am the poorest fellow in our caste and no wonder that they spurn me, but I won't look at them either,"* and so he passed on with his eyes downcast along the edge of the street, and people left him also very much alone, commenting only to the extent *, "Ah, there he goes with his two goats; if he slits their throats, he may have more peace of mind." "What has he to worry about anyway? They live on nothing and have none to worry about."*

Thus people commented when he passed through the village. Only on the outskirts did he lift his head and look up. He urged and bullied the goats until they meandered along to the foot of the horse statue on the edge of the village. He sat on its pedestal for the rest of the day. The advantage of this was that he could watch the highway and see the lorries and buses pass through to the hills, and it gave him a sense of belonging to a larger world. The pedestal of the statue was broad enough for him to move around as the sun traveled up and westward; or he could also crouch under the belly of the horse, for shade.

The horse was nearly life-size, moulded out of clay, baked, burnt, and brightly coloured, and reared its head proudly, prancing its forelegs in the air and flourishing its tail in a loop; beside the horse stood a warrior with scythe-like mustachios, bugling eyes, and aquiline nose. The old image-Page 3 of 10

Download free from www.fabmart.com

makers believed in indicating a man of strength by bulging out his eyes and sharpening his moustache tips, and also decorated the mud through the ravages of sun and wind and rain (When it came), but Muni would insist that he had known the beads to sparkle like the nine gems at one time in his life. The horse itself was said to have been as white as a dhobi-washed sheet, and had had on its back a cover of pure brocade of red and black lace, matching the multicolored sash around the waist of the warrior. But none in the village remembered the splendor as no one noticed its existence. Even Muni, who spent all his waking hours at its foot, never bothered to look up. It was untouched even by the young vandals of the village who gashed tree trunks with knives and tried to topple off milestones and inscribed lewd designs on all walls. This statue had been closer to the population of the village; but when the highway was laid through (or perhaps when the tank and wells dried up completely here) the village moved a couple of miles inland.

Muni sat at the foot of the statue, watching his two goats graze in the arid soil among the cactus and lantana bushes. He looked at the sun; it was tilted westward no doubt, but it was not the time to go back home; if he went to early his wife would have no food for him. Also he must give her time to cool off her temper and feel sympathetic, and then she would scrounge and manage to get some food. He watched the mountain road for a time signal. When the green bus appeared around the bend he could leave, and his wife would feel pleased that he had let the goats feed long enough.

He noticed now a new sort of vehicle coming down at full-speed. It looked like both a motorcar and a bus. He used to be intrigued by the novelty of such spectacles, but of late work was going on at the source of the river on the mountain and an assortment of people and traffic went past him, and he took it all casually and described to his wife, later in the day, everything he saw. Today, while he observed the yellow vehicle coming down, he was wondering how to describe it later to his wife, when it sputtered and stopped in front of him. A red-faced foreigner, who had been driving it, got down and went around it, stooping, looking, and poking under the vehicle; then he straightened himself up, looked at the dashboard, stared in Muni's direction, and approached him. *" Excuse me, is there a gas station nearby, or do I have to wait until another car comes"* He suddenly looked up at the clay horse and cried, *"Marvelous,"* without completing his sentence. Muni

felt he should get up and run away, and cursed his age. He could not readily put his limbs into action; some years ago he could outrun a cheetah, as happened once when he went to the forest to cut fuel and it was then that two of his sheep were mauled a sign that bad times were coming. Though he tried, he could not easily extricate himself from his seat, and then there was also the problem of the goats. He could not leave them behind.

The red-faced man wore khaki clothes- evidently a policeman or a solider. Muni said to himself, He will chase or shoot if I start running. Some dogs chase only those who run O Siva, protect me. I don't know why this man should be after me. Meanwhile the foreigner cried, *"Marvelous!"* again, nodding his head. He paced around the statute with his eyes fixed on it. Muni sat frozen for a while, and then fidgeted and tried to edge away. Now the other man suddenly pressed his palms together in a salute, smiled, and said, *"Nameste! How do you do?"*

At which Muni spoke the only English expressions he had learnt, *"Yes, no."* Having exhausted his English vocabulary, he started in Tamil: *"My name is Muni. These two goats are mine, and no one can gainsay it though our village is full of slanderers these days who will not hesitate to say that what*

Download free from www.fabmart.com

belongs to a man doesn't belong to him." He rolled his eyes and shuddered at the thought of evil-minded and women peopling his village.

The foreigner faithfully looked in the direction indicated by Muni's fingers gazed for a while at the two goats and the rocks, and with a puzzled expression took out his silver cigarette case and lit a cigarette. Suddenly remembering the courtesies of the season, he asked, *"Do you smoke?"* Muni answered *"Yes, no."* Whereupon the red-faced man took a cigarette and gave it to Muni, who received it with surprise, having had no offer of a smoke from anyone for years now. Those days when he smoked bhang were gone with his sheep and the large-hearted butcher. Nowadays he was not able to find even matches, let alone bhang. (His wife went across and borrowed a fire at dawn from a neighbor.) He had always wanted to smoke a cigarette; only once did the shopman give him one on credit, and he

remembered how good it had tasted. The other flicked the light open and offered the light to Muni. Muni felt so confused about how to act that he blew on it and put it out.

The other, puzzled but undaunted, flourished his lighter, presented it again, and lit Muni's cigarette.

Muni drew a deep puff and started coughing; it was racking, no doubt, but extremely pleasant.

When his cough subsided he wiped his eyes and took stock of the situation, understating that the other man was not an Inquisitor of any kind. Yet, in order to make sure, he remained wary. No need to run away from a man who gave him such a potent smoke. His head was reeling from one of those strong American cigarettes made with roasted tobacco. The man said, *"I come from New York,"*

took out a wallet from his hip pocket, and presented him his card.

Muni shrank away from the card. Perhaps he was trying to present a warrant and arrest him. Beware of khaki, one part of his mind warned. Take all the cigarettes or bhang or whatever is offered, but don't get caught. Beware of khaki. He wished he weren't seventy as the shopman had said. At seventy one didn't run, but surrendered to whatever came. He could only ward off trouble by talk.

So he went on, all in the chaste Tamil for which Kritam was famous. (Even the worse detractors could not deny that the famous poetess Avaiyar was born in this area, although no one could say whether it was in Kritam or Kuppam, the adjoining village.) Out of this heritage the Tamil language gushed through Muni in an unimpeded flow. He

,

said *"Before God, sir, Bhagwan, who sees everything, I tell you, sir, that we know nothing of the case. If the murder was committed, whoever did it will not escape. Bhagwan is all seeing. Don't ask me about it. I know nothing."* A body has been found mutilated and thrown under a tamarind tree at the border between Kritam and Kuppam a few weeks before, giving rise to much gossip and speculation. Muni added an

.

explanation *"Anything is*

possible there. People over there will stop at nothing." The foreigner nodded his head and listened courteously though he understood nothing.

"I am sure you know when this horse was made," said the red man and smiled ingratiatingly.

Muni reacted to the relaxed atmosphere by smiling himself, and pleased, *" Please go away, sir, I know nothing. I promise we will hold him for you if we see any bad character around, and we will bury him up to his neck in a coconut pit if he tries to escape; but our village has always had a clean record. Must definitely be the other village."*

Now the red man implored, *"Please, please, I will speak slowly, please try to understand me. Can't you understand even a simple word of English? Everyone in this country seems to know English. I*

Download free from www.fabmart.com

have gotten along with English everywhere in this country, but you don't speak it. Have you any religious or spiritual scruples against English speech?" Muni made some indistinct sounds in his throat and shook his head. Encouraged, the other went on to explain at length, uttering each syllable with care and deliberation. Presently he sidled over and took a seat beside the old man, explaining, *"*

You see, last August, we probably had the hottest summer in history, and I was working in shirt-sleeves in my office on the fortieth floor of the Empire State Building. We had a power failure one day, you know, and there I was stuck for four hours, no elevator, no air conditioning. All the way in the train I kept thinking, and the minute I reached how in Connecticut, I told my wife, Ruth, 'We will visit India this winter, it's time to look at other civilizations.' Next day she called the travel agent first thing and told him to fix it, and so here I am. Ruth came with me but is staying back at Srinagar, and I am the one doing the rounds and joining her later."

Muni looked reflective at the end of this long oration and said rather feebly, *"Yes, no,"* as a concession to the other's language, and went on in Tamil, *"When I was this high"* he indicated a foot high *"I had heard my uncle say…"*

No one can tell what he was planning to say, as the other interrupted him at this stage to ask, *"Boy, what is the secret of your teeth? How old are you?"*

The old man forgot what he had started to say and remarked, *"Sometimes we too lose our cattle.*

Jackals or cheetahs may sometimes carry them off, but sometimes it is just theft from over in the next village, and then we will know who has done it. Our priest at the temple can see in the camphor flame the face of the thief, and when he is caught…." He gestured with his hands a perfect mincing of meat.

The American watched his hands intently and said, *"I know what you mean. Chop something?*

Maybe I am holding you up and you want to chop wood? Where is your axe? Hand it to me and show me what to chop. I do enjoy it, you know, just a hobby. We get a lot of driftwood along the backwater near my house, and on Sundays I do nothing but chop wood for the fireplace, although it may take all the sections of the Sunday New York Times to get a fire started." And he smiled at this reference.

Muni felt totally confused but decided the best thing would be to make an attempt to get away from this place. He tried to edge out, saying, *"Must go home,"* and turned to go. The other seized his shoulder and said desperately, *"Is there no one, absolutely no one here, to translate for me?"* He looked up and down the road, which was deserted in this hot afternoon; a sudden gust of wind churned up the dust and dead leaves on the roadside into a ghostly column and propelled it towards the mountain road. The stranger almost pinioned Muni's back to the statue and asked, *"Isn't this statue yours? Why don't you sell it to me?"* The old man now understood the reference to the horse, thought for a second, and said in his own language, *"I was an urchin this high when I heard my grandfather explain this horse and warrior, and my grandfather himself was this high when he heard his grandfather, whose grandfather…"* The other man interrupted him. *" I*

don't want to seem to have stopped here for nothing. I will offer you a good price for this," he said, indicating the horse. He had concluded without the least doubt that Muni owned this mud horse. Perhaps he guessed by the way he sat on his pedestal, like other souvenir sellers in this country presiding over their wares.

Muni followed the man's eyes, and pointing fingers and dimly understood the subject matter and, feeling relieved that the theme of the mutilated body had been abandoned at least for the time *Page 6 of 10*

Download free from www.fabmart.com

being, said again, enthusiastically, *"I was this high when my grandfather told me about this horse and the warrior, and my grandfather was this high when he himself ..."* and he was getting into a deeper bog of reminiscence each time he tried to indicate the antiquity of the statue.

The Tamil that Muni spoke was stimulating even as pure sound, and the foreigner listened with fascination. *" I wish I had my tape-recorder here,"* he said, assuming the pleasantest expression. *"*

Your language sounds wonderful. I get a kick out of every word you utter,

-

here" he indicated his ears-

"but you don't have to waste your breath in sales talk. I appreciate the article. You don't have to explain its points.""I never went to a school, in those days only Brahmin went to schools, but we had to go out and work in the fields morning till night, sowing to harvest time... and when Pongal came and we cut the harvest, my father allowed me to go out and play with others at the tank, and so I don't know the Parangi language you speak, even little fellows in your country probably speak the Parangi language, but here only leaned men and officers know it. We had a postman in our village who could speak to you boldly in your language, but his wife ran away with someone and he does not speak with anyone at all nowadays. Who would if a wife did what she did? Women must be watched; otherwise they sell themselves and the home." And he laughed at

his own quip.

The foreigner laughed heartily, took out another cigarette, and offered it to Muni, who now smoked with ease, deciding to stay on if the fellow was going to be so good as to keep up his cigarette supply.

The American now stood up on the pedestal in the attitude of a demonstrative lecturer and said, running his finger along some of the carved decorations around the horse's neck, speaking slowly and uttering his words syllable by syllable, *"I could give a sales talk for this better that anyone else…*

This is a marvelous combination of yellow and indigo, though faded now… How do you people of this country achieve these flaming colors?"

Muni, now assured that the subject was still the horse and not the dead body, said, *"This is our guardian, it means death to our adversaries. At the end of Kali Yuga, this world and all other worlds will be destroyed, and the Redeemer will come in the shape of a horse called Kalki, this horse will come to life and gallop and trample down all bad men."* As he spoke of bad men the figures of his shopman and his brother-in-law assumed concrete forms in his mind, and he revelled for a moment in the predicament of the fellow under the horse's hoof; served him right for trying to set fire to his home.

While he was brooding on this pleasant vision, the foreigner utilized the pause to say, *" I assure you that this will have the best home in the U.S.A. I'll push away the bookcase, you know I love books and am a member of five book clubs, and the choice and bonus volumes mount up to a pile really in our living room, as high as this horse itself. But they'll have to go. Ruth may disapprove, but I will convince her. The TV may have to be shifted, too. We can't have everything in the living room. Ruth will probably say what about when we have a party? I'm going to keep him right in the middle of the room.*

I don't see how that can interfere with the party we'll stand around him and have our drinks."

Muni continued his description of the end of the world. *"Our pundit discoursed at the temple once how the oceans are going to close over the earth in a huge wave and carry on its back only the good people and kick*

into the floods the evil ones plenty of them about " he said reflectively. *"Do you know when it is going to happen?"* he asked.

Download free from www.fabmart.com

The foreigner now understood by the tone of the other that a question was being asked and said ,

"How am I transporting it? I can push the seat back and make room in the rear. That van can take an elephant -

" waving precisely at the back of the seat.

Muni was still hovering on visions of avatars and said again, *"I never missed our pundit's discourses at the temple in those days during every bright half of the month, although he'd go on all night, and he told that Vishnu is the highest god. Whenever evil men trouble us, he comes down to save us. He has come many times. The first time he incarnated as a great fish, and lifted the scriptures on his back when the flood and sea waves…."""I am not a millionaire, but a modest businessman. My trade is coffee."*

Amidst all this wilderness of obscure sound Muni caught the word " coffee" and said , *"If you want to drink 'kapi,' drive further up, in the next town, they have Friday market and there they open 'kapi-otels'-*

so I learn from passer-by. Don't think I wander about. I go nowhere and look for nothing." His thoughts went back to the avatars. *" The first avatar was in the shape of a little fish in a bowl of water, but every hour it grew bigger and bigger and became in the end a huge whale the holy books were supported, saved, and carried."* Once he had launched on the first avatar, it was inevitable that he should go on to the next, a wild boar on whose tusk the earth was lifted when a vicious conqueror of the earth carried it off and hid it at the bottom of the sea. After describing this avatar Muni concluded , *" God will always save us whenever we are troubled by evil begins. When we were young we staged at full moon the story of the avatars. That's how I know the stories; we played them all night until the*

sun rose, and sometimes the European collector would come to watch, bringing his own chair. I had a good voice and so they always taught me songs and gave me the women's roles. I was always Goddess Lakshmi, and they dressed me in a brocade sari, loaned form the Big House…"

The foreigner said, *" I repeat I am not a millionaire. Ours is a modest business; after all, we can't afford to buy more than sixty minutes of TV times in a month, which works out to two minutes a day, that's all, although in the course of time we'll maybe sponsor a one-hour show regularly if our sales graph continues to go*

Muni

up…"

was intoxicated by the memory of his theatrical days and was about to explain how he had painted his face and worn a wig and diamond earring when the visitor, feeling that he had spent too much time already, said *, "Tell me, will you accept a hundred rupees or not for the horse? I'd love to take the whiskered soldier also but no space for him this year. I'll have to cancel my air ticket and take a boat home, I suppose. Ruth can go by air if she likes, but I will go with the horse and keep him in my cabin all the way if necessary."* And he smiled at the picture of himself voyaging across the seas hugging this horse. He added, *" I will have to pad it with straw so that it doesn't break…" "When we played Ramayana, they dressed me as Sita,"* added Muni. *"A teacher came and taught us the songs for the drama and we gave him fifty rupees. He incarnated himself as Rama, and he alone could destroy Ravana, the demon with ten heads who shook all the worlds; do you know the story of Ramayana?"*

"I have a station wagon as you see. I can push the seat back and take the horse in if you will lend me a hand with it." "Do you know Mahabharata? Krishna was the eight avatar of Vishnu, incarnated to help the Five Brothers regain their kingdom. When Krishna was a baby he danced on the thousand-hooded giant serpent and trampled it to death; and then he suckled the breasts of the demoness and left them flat as a disc, though when she came to him her bosoms were large, like mounds of earth on

Download free from www.fabmart.com

the banks of a dug-up canal." He indicated two mounds with his hands.

The stranger was completely mystified by the gesture. For the first time he said, *"I really wonder what are you saying because your answer is crucial. We have come to the point when we should be ready to talk business."*

When

"

the tenth avatar comes, do you know where you and I will be?" asked the old man.

Lend me a hand and I can lift off the horse from its pedestal after picking out the cement at the joints.

We can do anything if we have a basis of understanding."

At this stage the mutual mystification was complete, and there was no need even to carry on a guessing game at the meaning of words. The old man chattered away in a spirit of balancing off the credits and debits of conversational exchange, and said in order to be on the credit sale, *" Oh, honourable one, I hope God has blessed you with numerous progeny. I say this because you seem to be a good man, willing to stay beside an old man and talk to him, while all day I have none to talk to except when somebody stops to ask for a piece of tobacco. But I seldom have it, tobacco is not what it used to be at one time, and I have given up chewing. I cannot afford it nowadays."* Noting the other's interest in his speech, Muni felt encouraged to ask, *" How many children have you?"* with appropriate gestures with his hands.

Realizing that a question was being asked, the red man replied, *" I said a hundred,"* which encouraged Muni to go into details. *" How many of your children are boys and how many girls?*

Where are they? Is your daughter married? Is it difficult to find a son-in-law in your country also?"

In answer to these questions the red man dashed his hands into his pocket and brought forth his wallet in order to take immediate advantage of the bearish trend in the market. He flourished a hundred-rupee currency note and said, *" Well this is what I meant."*

The old man now realized that some financial element was entering their talk. He peered closely at the currency note, the like of which he had never seen in his life, he knew the five and ten by their colours although always in other people's hands, while his own earning at that time was in coppers and nickels. What was this man flourishing the note for? Perhaps asking for change. He laughed to himself at the notion of anyone coming to him for changing a thousand-or-ten-thousand-rupee note. He said with a grin, *"Ask our village headman, who is also a moneylender; he can change even a lakh of rupees in gold sovereigns if you prefer it that way; he thinks nobody knows, but dig the floor of his puja room and your head will reel at the sight of the hoard. The man disguises himself in rags just to mislead the public. Talk to the headman yourself because he goes mad at the sight of me.*

Someone took away his pumpkins with the creeper and he, for some reason, thinks it was me and my goats…that's why I never let my goats be seen anywhere near the farms." His eyes traveled to his goats nosing about, attempting to wrest nutrition from minute greenery peeping out of rock and dry earth.

The foreigner followed his look and decided that it would be a sound policy to show an average interest in the old man's pets. He went up casually to them and stroked their backs with every show of courteous attention. Now the truth dawned on the old man. His dream of a lifetime was about to be

Download free from www.fabmart.com

realised. He understood that the red man was actually making an offer for the goats. He had reared them up in hope of selling them some day and, with capital, opening a small shop on this very spot. Sitting here, watching towards the hills, he had often dreamt how he would put up a thatched roof here, spread a gunny sack out on the ground, and display on it fired nuts,

coloured sweets and green coconut for the thirsty and famished wayfarers on the highway, which was sometimes very busy. The animals were not his prize ones for a cattle show, but he had spent his occasional savings to provide them with some fancy diet and then, and they did not look too bad. While he was reflecting thus, the red man shook his hand and left on his palm one hundred rupees in tens now, suddenly realizing that this was what the old man was asking . *"It is all for you or you may share it if you have a partner."*

The old man pointed at the station wagon and asked, *" Are you carrying them off in that?"*

"Yes, of course," said the other, understanding the transportation part of it.

The old man said, *"This will be their first ride in a motor car. Carry them off after I get out of sight, otherwise they will never follow you, but only me even if I am travelling on the path to Yama Loka."*

He laughed at his own joke, brought his palms together in a salute, turned around and went off, and was soon out of sight beyond a clump of thicket.

The red man looked at the goats grazing peacefully. Perched on the pedestal of the horse, as the westerly sun touched off the ancient faded colours of the statue with a fresh splendor, he ruminated,

"

He must be gone to fetch some help, I suppose!" and settled down to wait. When a truck came downhill, he stopped it and got the help of a couple of men to detach the horse from its pedestal and place it in his station wagon. He gave the five rupees each, and for a further payment they siphoned off gas from the truck, and helped him to start his engine.

Muni hurried homeward with the cash securely tucked away at his waist dhoti. He shut the street door and stole up softly to his wife as she squatted before the lit oven wondering if by a miracle food would drop from the sky. Muni displayed his fortune for the day. She snatched the notes from him, counted them by the glow of the fire, and cried *" One hundred rupees! How did you come by it?*

Have you been stealing?""I have sold our goats to a red-faced man. He

was absolutely crazy to have them, gave me all this money and carried them off in his motor car!"

Hardly had these words left his lips when they heard the bleating outside. She opened the door and saw the two goats at her door. *"Here they are!"* she said. *"What's the meaning of all this?"*

He muttered a great curse and seized one of the goats by its ears and shouted *, " Where is that man?*

Don't you know you are his? Why did you come back?" The goat only wriggled in his grip. He asked the same question of the other, too. The goat shook itself off. His wife glared at him and declared, *"*

If you have thieved, the police will come tonight and break your bones. Don't involve me. I will go away to my parents…."

©copyright R K Narayan

Download free from www.fabmart.com